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AN INTIMATE BIOGRAPHY *

It is fifteen years since the assassination of William McKinley, and the years have been filled with a rush of events that have carried us very rapidly into another and a different world from that in which he rose to first place. For some years immediately following his death it was with difficulty that one recognized the trend of national affairs at Washington as but remotely connected with his administration. This continued to be the case in the years 1906-1912, and with even greater emphasis, in spite of the presence in the White House of an Ohio son during a portion of that time. But more recent events have been such as to recall very vividly the outstanding events of the McKinley regime. Not only in the high importance of diplomatic affairs, but also in the nature of the discussion between the two great political parties, we seem nearer the campaign of 1896, and the developments that followed, than at any other time in the ensuing twenty years.

Thus, even though this biography of McKinley would have been welcome, its publication at this time is peculiarly apt. Hitherto seekers for information have had recourse to campaign biographies or those published immediately following the assassination. Naturally these were disappointing. The definitive biography of McKinley was awaited, and here it is.

In preparing this work Mr. Olcott secured materials from, and had the aid and advice of, three men closely associated with McKinley while President,—Mr. George B. Cortelyou, Secretary to the President; Mr. William R. Day, Secretary of State during the Spanish war; and Mr. Charles G. Dawes, close personal and political friend. Many others have aided, notably Mr. Charles W. Fairbanks, who permitted the author of this work to make use of an unpublished manuscript of reminiscences. The list of those who have recounted to Mr. Olcott their relations with McKinley reads like

* *The Life of William McKinley*. By Charles S. Olcott. In two volumes. Illustrated. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1916.

a political roster of the first administration. The author states that he has relied much upon recollections of conversations and incidents, where neither the diaries of others nor the meagre notes kept by or for McKinley were available. The great difficulty under which the author has labored is stated thus in the preface:—

“William McKinley was not a prolific letter writer, nor did he ever, as far as I know, even attempt to keep a diary. . . . Too often the correspondence on some promising subject came suddenly to an end—disappointing to the biographer—with a cordial ‘Won’t you come and see me?’ I have found a few letters that seemed to reveal the true depth of his nature; but as a rule McKinley did not commit to paper his plans and purposes, nor his inmost thoughts and aspirations. He much preferred a meeting, face to face, and a confidential talk.”

Writing at the time he did, Mr. Olcott had countless opportunities to hear the testimony of the other party in these meetings, but it is hardly necessary to point out the dangers in dependence upon such evidence. When one remembers the huge volumes of the published correspondence of John C. Calhoun and of Daniel Webster or the painstaking diaries kept by Polk and by Hayes while in the Presidency, the wonder is that so definite a figure emerges from the pages of these two volumes.

McKinley was the fifth of the six natives of Ohio that have reached the Presidency. Like Grant, Hayes, Garfield, and Harrison before him, he served in the Union army. Younger than any of them, he did not reach a rank in the army that enabled him thereafter to be termed “General,” but he was known as the “Major” throughout his earlier political career, and even later on occasion. His political career in length and importance outdistanced any of his fellows from Ohio.

Eighteen at the time of enlistment, McKinley saw many incidents with a boy’s eyes. Writing from camp at Weston, Va., under date of August 11, 1861:—

“Three hundred of us remain here as a guard, and I can tell you we are doing the thing up ‘bravely,’ yea, ‘heroi-

cally.' We have entire possession of the town. The other night, some of the Twenty-third Regiment, while out on picket . . . returned in the morning possessed of quite a scary story. The substance was as follows: That while out in the darkness of night, when all was calm and quiet as the sea on a still summer's day, a strange noise was heard. . . . This was a terrific, appalling report, and preparations were made to catch the rebels. On the following night four of us volunteered to go out and catch the 'seceshers' if possible. Accordingly we started out about dusk, led by a certain lieutenant of our regiment. It would have done you good to have seen the above lieutenant prodding the thick bushes with his gilded sword, fancying to himself that he saw the hideous monster in the shape of a rebel. Ah, the ambitious officer was disappointed; instead of sticking a secesh he, without doubt, stuck a skunk. He came to this conclusion from the fact that a strong smell, a venomous smell, instantly issued from the bushes."

McKinley saw considerable service in the field as a member of the famous Twenty-third Ohio. For "gallant and meritorious service" he was made brevet-major of volunteers on March 13, 1865, and with that rank was mustered out in July.

Two years later McKinley entered upon the practice of law, and, coincident with this, the field of politics. Ten years later he appeared in Washington as Congressman-elect from Canton, Ohio. His service in the House was thereafter practically unbroken until 1891. In those years the Republicans controlled both Senate and House but two years, 1889-1891; years in which Reed as Speaker and McKinley as Chairman of Ways and Means Committee led the Republican party in the House. In thirteen years of congressional service he came to be known widely for his advocacy of a protective tariff.

Many other congressmen in this period spoke at length upon the tariff, but we learn from this biography that McKinley, upon the advice of President Hayes, resolved upon special study of the subject.

"From the time of his first speech in Congress until the end of his life, McKinley sought to elaborate, clarify, and systematize the true American policy of Protection. . . . He laid down the cardinal principle of the Protectionist

school in these words: 'It is our duty, and we ought to protect as sacredly and assuredly the labor and industry of the United States as we would protect her honor from taint and her territory from invasion.'"

This point of view is familiar, as are the examples of McKinley's views cited by the author. When asked many years later why, in making the famous bill of 1890 that bore his name, he consented to such high rates, he replied: "For the best reason in the world,—to get the bill passed. My idea was to get the act through Congress, and to make necessary reductions later." The author states that William McKinley became "the guardian angel, in the halls of Congress, of the industries of the country."

With ample recognition of the work of the other Republican members of the Ways and Means Committee the Chairman, McKinley, is made to assume full responsibility for the unpopular bill that was reported early in 1890, and having been debated at length, finally, with unimportant Senate amendments, became law on October 1st of that year. In becoming the issue of the congressional elections of that year this law did not lack for commendation. Of it McKinley said:—

"With me this position is a deep conviction, not a theory. I believe in it, and thus warmly advocate it because enveloped in it are my country's highest development and greatest prosperity; out of it come the greatest gains to the people, the greatest comforts to the masses, the widest encouragement for manly aspirations, with the largest rewards, dignifying and elevating our citizenship, upon which the safety and purity and permanency of our political system depend."

Even such lofty recommendation did not prevent opponents of McKinley in his own district from success when, in the days preceding the election, they had tin peddlers go about the district offering copper pots at \$1.50, and tin cups, worth five cents, for twenty-five cents or more. Whether due to this misrepresentation or not, McKinley, in common with a majority of his Republican colleagues, lost his seat.

It was once said that the speeches of McKinley sounded, not only as delivered, but also as written in a frock coat. McKinley

did excel in the "set-speech." Apparently the steady mode of expression was entirely natural, even when he was called upon unexpectedly. At a time when the Republican convention of 1888 was deadlocked upon the question of nominee, a delegate arose and cast a vote for McKinley, already prominent in this convention as Chairman of the Committee on Resolutions. McKinley interrupted the roll call, saying:—

"I am here as one of the chosen representatives of my state. I am here by resolution of the Republican state convention, passed without a single dissenting voice, commanding me to cast my vote for John Sherman for President, and to use every worthy endeavor for his nomination. I accepted the trust because my heart and judgment were in accord with the letter and spirit and purpose of that resolution. It has pleased certain delegates to cast their votes for me for President. I am not insensible to the honor they would do me, but in the presence of the duty resting upon me I cannot remain silent with honor. I cannot, consistently with the wish of the state whose credentials I bear, and which has trusted me; I cannot with honorable fidelity to John Sherman, who has trusted me in his cause and with his confidence; I cannot, consistently with my own views of personal integrity, consent, or even seem to consent, to permit my name to be used as a candidate before this convention. . . . I do not request,—I demand, that no delegate who would not cast reflection upon me shall cast a ballot for me."

Whether prepared or not, in this speech McKinley revealed those qualities that gave him the power he had in American politics. While Governor of Ohio, 1891–1895, he continued in public eye outside his state. In the course of the congressional campaign of 1894 he traveled 12,000 miles, addressed 2,000,000 people, at one time making twenty-three speeches in one day.

In 1893 he was drawn into a financial difficulty that gave rise to an ugly story as to his method of extrication therefrom. Mr. Olcott states the case as follows: A friend of McKinley's, whose notes he had endorsed, made an assignment in bankruptcy. The amount, as first understood, was \$25,000, and as McKinley found this too heavy a debt for his small amount of property, he considered that his political career was at an end. In spite of his protest, friends subscribed \$25,000. "Not a man of those

ever sought or held office, or accepted any favor in return for his contribution." Later the indebtedness was found to be \$130,000. This larger amount was subscribed by a number of wealthy men, and although McKinley, as well as Mrs. McKinley, turned over to those in charge all their property, none of it was used in payment. Messrs. Kohlsaat, Day, and Herrick were trustees in this matter, and Hanna played an important part.

Mr. Olcott does not make definite the first meeting of McKinley and Hanna. He does state that in 1876 McKinley appeared as an attorney in a case in which the firm of which Hanna was a member comprised the opposition. Little new light is thrown on the relations of the two men. It is clear that McKinley gladly accepted the political aid of Hanna in the campaign of 1896. Yet he refused to close a "deal" with eastern bosses which Hanna desired. Doubtless he was certain of the nomination. As Senator "Billy" Mason remarked, "Nobody seemed to be for McKinley except the people." About the same time Abe Ruef in San Francisco was supporting McKinley as the man opposed to the "bosses." Perhaps the relations between McKinley and Hanna came nearest breaking in the midst of the convention of 1900. Elihu Root said of them, "Hanna was a strong and vigorous man, but McKinley was the controlling spirit of the two."

The beginning of the "front-porch" campaign came about in this way: On the day of the nomination a large number of McKinley's townsmen gathered to greet him when the news of success finally came. The crowds from other towns came also. Between five o'clock in the afternoon and midnight McKinley had addressed 50,000 persons, some of whom had come from Niles, his birthplace, sixty miles distant.

The charge that McKinley appointed Sherman Secretary of State in order to make place for Hanna in the Senate is handled thus: A letter of McKinley's to Sherman offering him the place is printed. It is dated January 4, 1897. Sherman accepted and on January 17, 1897, McKinley acknowledged acceptance. A letter dated February 18, 1897, is printed. This letter from McKinley to Hanna urges the latter to come into the Cabinet (the matter had been raised earlier) but despairs of obtaining consent

from Hanna and wishes him success in his ambition to go to the Senate. From these letters Mr. Olcott concludes that McKinley did not appoint Sherman to make way for Hanna. He cites also the late decision of the Governor to appoint Hanna to the vacancy. The evidence is slight, and to this reviewer not conclusive,—as so frequently in these volumes the evidence presented does not seem to warrant the warmth and certainty of the generalizations stated.

Doubtless in the biography of a "much-loved" president the eulogistic tone must dominate. Yet it is irritating at times to find matters of the head glossed over by a sweeping reference to the heart. The author quotes with approval a comment of Judge Taft,—“He had such a good heart that the right thing to do always occurred to him.” There is repeated evidence that McKinley felt that way too when faced with the difficulty of decision. The clearest case is his explanation of the forming of his decision with reference to the retention of the Philippines.

Naturally much space is given to the Spanish war period and the questions arising therefrom. Fortunately Mr. Olcott had available a considerable body of important material, notably the diary kept by Mr. Cortelyou and certain letters of John Hay and Whitelaw Reid relating to the peace negotiations. These chapters comprise important contributions, although it is clear they are but a promise of what may subsequently be revealed, not of McKinley perhaps, but of the period in general.

The well-known letter of the Spanish minister De Lome is printed. One paragraph has been frequently forgotten, probably because the slighting reference to McKinley in an earlier paragraph concentrated attention. Wrote De Lome:—

“It would be very advantageous to take up, even if only for effect, the question of commercial relations, and to have a man of some prominence sent hither in order that I may make use of him here to carry on a propaganda among the Senators and others in opposition to the Junta, and to try to win over the refugees.”

Mr. Olcott draws a vivid picture of the pressure upon McKinley in April, 1898. Vice-President Hobart, and Senators Hanna, Spooner, Platt (Conn.), Aldrich, McMillan, Frye, and

Fairbanks were close to the President at this juncture. McKinley apparently decided the matter by himself, and when war was finally declared took active command which he held to the end. Against the recommendation of Shafter and later of Miles, both of them in the field, McKinley insisted upon the unconditional surrender of General Toral in command at Santiago, Cuba. From the Cortelyou diary under date April 16, 1898:—

“The President does not look at all well. He is bearing up under a great strain. . . . The vile slanders uttered against him and which, be it said to their shame, have not been repudiated by his so-called friends, have only tended to endear him to those of us who see him as he works here in the Executive Mansion, early and late, oftentimes in his office until one or two o'clock in the morning.”

Again, May 15, 1898:—

“The President is again looking care-worn, the color having faded from his cheeks and the rings being once more noticeable about the eyes. The strain upon him is terrible. Uncertainty as to the whereabouts of the Cape Verde fleet; the growing unrest and threatening character of the European situation,—these, coupled with the many difficulties constantly arising as a result of the short-sighted policy which for so long a time has been pursued by Congress, leaving the country poorly prepared for hostilities, make the burden upon the Executive shoulders a heavy one.”

The letters of John Hay written from England must have heartened McKinley. Under date of October 6, 1897, Hay tells of an informal talk with Lord Salisbury in which Hay's impression was that in case we intervened in Cuba we need expect no interference from England. On April 4, 1898, he wrote:—

“If sympathy and approval from the outside is worth anything to you, I can assure you it is yours, to the fullest extent, from this country. . . . Earl Grey, for instance, said yesterday, ‘Why do not the United States borrow our navy to make a quick job of Cuba? They could return us the favor another time.’ I had a serious talk with Mr. Chamberlain last night. He is extremely desirous of a close alliance with us. . . . ‘Shoulder to shoulder,’ he said, ‘we could command peace the world over.’”

On July 6, 1898, he wrote :—

“We have never in all our history had the standing in the world we have now, and this, I am sure, is greatly due to the unfailing dignity, firmness and wisdom you have shown in every emergency of the past year.”

After a talk with Count Hatvfeldt, German ambassador to England, Hay wrote on July 14, 1898 :—

“What he said, as you will see, amounted to this : the German government are most anxious that we shall be convinced of the friendliness of their attitude and intentions ; they also want us to understand that they wish a few coaling stations in the Pacific that they think we might give them ; they would also like a free hand at Samoa. . . . Whatever we do or refuse to do, so that our action and our words are pitched in diplomatic tones,—not putting any affront on them which they shall be forced to take up,—they will not quarrel with us.”

Later he wrote, however :—

“I have no doubt that Germany has been intriguing both with Aguinaldo and with Spain. They are most anxious to get a foothold there ; but if they do it there will be danger of grave complications with other European powers.”

Whitelaw Reid, one of the American peace commissioners, wrote to McKinley of the beginning of the negotiations :—

“I got a private hint on the day of our arrival about M. Delcasse’s purpose to bring the two sets of Commissioners together socially at his breakfast table. At the breakfast Castillo struck at once what I believe to be their permanent tone. He came to me from the crowd on his side. . . . ‘You have had a great victory, the first you have really had over a foreign foe, for Mexico did not count. Now you must prove your greatness by your magnanimity.’ . . . It was really a dramatic spectacle, while these provisions for deeding away the last vestige of their possessions in the world they had discovered and conquered were slowly read and translated. They were all visibly moved, and old Montero looked as a Roman Senator might when told that the Goths were at the gates.”

Unquestionably McKinley rose to the demands of the situation in the war period in a manner to surprise even his friends.

He drafted a reply to the Spanish proposals that was the basis for the American answer ; he determined and sent final instructions to the Commissioners to demand the Philippines ; he used tact and determination at the time when the treaty was before the Senate in the winter of 1899. Perhaps it was natural for him to feel more confident in his powers when the Boxer matter rose in 1900. He and Root did not agree as to our reply to the proposal to place Count Waldersee in command of allied forces. Root urged that our acceptance should be qualified to the extent that American officers should determine discipline and placement, and it was only after a lengthy telephone conversation, which is given in full, that McKinley acquiesced. John Hay was another member of the Cabinet exercised over the details of our course that summer. He was searching for a means of retaining our prestige without following the course marked out by our allies in China. He had no illusions. He wrote Adee, "The talk of the papers about 'our preëminent moral position giving us the authority to dictate to the world' is mere flapdoodle."

Mr. Olcott has selected a series of anecdotes illustrative of the relations of the President with his fellows. When Root was asked to become Secretary of War, he protested that he knew nothing of war or the army. Said McKinley, "I don't want a man who knows about war and the army. I want a lawyer to handle the problems of the new islands, and you are the lawyer I want." It would seem that the appointment of Judge Taft to the Philippine Commission was more accidental. William R. Day was an associate of Taft on the bench, and in 1899, while McKinley was in Ohio, Taft met McKinley at Day's house. General Corbin was also present. Upon the return to Washington Corbin suggested to Secretary Root that Taft was "just the man for the Philippines." Root brought the matter to the President and Taft was summoned to Washington. The acceptance was not easily gained, as is well known, and, in the period of hesitation, McKinley wrote Day of the matter, saying, "It is a great field for him [Taft], a great opportunity, and he will never have so good a one to serve his country." Such men as Senators Hoar and Cullom, Secretaries Taft and Root and Mr. Hanna have

repeated testimony of the sympathetic persuasiveness of McKinley. Said a Congressman in telling his experience :—

“Mr. President, many of us, before the war, thought you were too weak. I was appointed a committee of one to tell you what we thought. I called and you received me. When I went back to report, all I could say was, ‘I don’t know a damn word he said, but it’s all right, boys.’ You took it all out of me.”

Perhaps it is natural that the United States of the last decade of the nineteenth century should have had such a man as its representative citizen. Only such a man could carry conviction when he said, “the currents of destiny flow through the hearts of the people.”

In these volumes there is nothing to show that McKinley was a great man. He was a safe man, and he was a good man, perhaps inherently not much better than others who have occupied the Presidency, but with singular power for enhancing the goodness in the public service. In presenting this biography, with descriptive background, balanced statement, and measured style, Mr. Olcott is to be congratulated. Years hence a critical biographer of McKinley, with the perspective of years and increased materials, may place the martyred President more justly in national history; but it is safe to say that the personal biography of McKinley has been written by Mr. Olcott.

EDGAR E. ROBINSON.

Stanford University, California.